

Travel to Irkutsk, Russia  
June 2001

## 1. Overview

Mt. Edgecumbe High School in Sitka, Alaska was selected by the American Councils for International Education (ACCELS) to participate in an exchange program with the Lyceum of Irkutsk State University, Siberia. Mt. Edgecumbe was the only American school in the program to choose a school in Siberia. The nine students and two chaperones from Irkutsk arrived in Sitka on March 18 and stayed until April 8, 2001. The ten students from Mt. Edgecumbe and three chaperones were in Irkutsk from May 13 to June 5, 2001.

Ms. Brenda Campen, Mt. Edgecumbe High School teacher and head of the exchange program, personally invited Ranger Peter Gorman in February of 2000 to accompany the student group as a representative of the National Park Service. This invitation was extended because of the mutual interest in Russian America history shared by Mt. Edgecumbe High School and Sitka National Historical Park.

The Russians Bishops House acquired by the National Park Service in order to:

Preserve in public ownership for the benefit and inspiration of present and future generations of Americans an area which illustrates a part of Russia's exploration and colonization of Alaska...

I applied for and was awarded Horace M. Albright-Conrad L. Wirth Grant Fellowship for the fiscal year 2001 to help pay for travel expenses.

### 1.1. Interpretation and landscapes

In 1824 a young Russian Orthodox priest named Ioan Veniaminov arrived in Sitka with his family after an arduous journey from the town of Irkutsk in central Siberia. He overwintered in Sitka before traveling on to his missionary post in Unalaska in the Aleutian Island where he was to spend the next ten years. Little did he know that he would return to Sitka to both serve there as a priest and then later as Bishop of Kamchatka, the Kurile Islands and the Aleutians.

As a ranger interpreting the life and impact of Bishop Innocent, it is crucial to understand both the cultural and geographic landscape which formed the backdrop to his life. The landscape Veniaminov traversed stretches from Moscow to Irkutsk to Petropavlosk and from the Aleutians in Alaska to Fort Ross in California. He kayaked the Aleutian Islands, traveled to the Pribilofs and Commander Islands, and descended the Amur River and the Lena River. He took a profound interest in the native people of these regions and spoke Aleut fluently, Tlingit passably, and several Siberian languages.

## 2. Exchange Program

The purpose of the exchange was to focus on the environment, historical links to Sitka and local government, and to dispel stereotypes about other cultures.

Our host teacher at the Lyceum of Irkutsk was Alexemihalovitch (Alex) Savchenko. Long involved in the English language programs in the Irkutsk region he is a respected teacher with a vast network of connections.

Alex arranged for me to stay with a retired teacher who had taught him English at the Foreign Language Institute. My hostess, Nadezda, lived in the historic section of downtown Irkutsk. I was three blocks from the churches that Bishop Innocent attended as a young seminarian in the early 1800s. A fluent English speaker Nadezda guided me around town and gave me her living room couch to sleep on in her small flat. Each day sitting at her tiny kitchen table sharing a meal was a lesson in Russian history. I heard stories about Nadezda's experiences during the Great Patriotic War and about the wounded from Stalingrad being sent to Irkutsk. All the schools were emptied and used as hospitals. Nadezda told me that at 12 years of age she was in the wards caring for the horribly wounded casualties. At 16, because there was no else, she started teaching in elementary schools. From that point on she taught for 51 years.

#### 2.1.1. School Visits and Meetings with School Officials

The majority of the time during the exchange was spent visiting schools in different regions around Irkutsk. Visits were made to Angarsk, Bratsk, Baikalsk and Irkutsk. These trips gave us an opportunity to see the country, visit museums, and meet with various state officials. Every single school we visited made elaborate arrangements for our reception. The faculty and students would all be eagerly waiting for us on the school steps. Several times, we were greeted with the traditional presentation of bread and salt. We were escorted into the principal's office to meet the regional superintendent for education and the English teachers. After introductions we would tour the school, visit classes, and attend presentations prepared by the students. At several rural schools, we were the first Americans to visit. At each school, a lunch or an elaborate reception had been specially prepared for us. Considering that the average Russian teacher makes about fifty dollars a month, the sacrifice involved in these efforts was great.

It was fascinating how quickly the Mt. Edgecumbe and Russian students formed bonds of friendship. The Mt. Edgecumbe students were very unassuming, allowing them to rapidly overcome cultural differences.

We sometimes visited three schools a day. Everyone became weary but no one faltered. It became apparent that we had been thrown into the role of unofficial representatives of our country.

Details of every school visit would be too lengthy. The following is a brief synopsis of one community we visited.

Angarsk was a closed city until two and half years ago. It was built by Stalin as a planned industrial city to support a huge petrochemical facility. This facility employs 18,000 and supports a town of 300,000. We visited numerous schools and were overwhelmed with the enthusiasm of the students and the dedication of the teachers.

At one school, Brenda Campen and I attended a history class and the students peppered us with questions. One student wanted to know why we only studied about Normandy Beach and none of their efforts in the Great Patriotic War. Brenda was able to reply that Alaska is working on a memorial in Fairbanks to Russian and American aviators lost flying planes to the Russian far east for the Lend Lease Program during World War II.

At the request of one of the teachers, I taught one of the classes and used the opportunity to show the new video on Sitka National Historical Park and answer questions.

### 2.1.2. Historic Research

#### *2.1.2.1. Research into Bishop Innocent*

There is a Siberian proverb that in effect says “your elbow is near but you can’t bite it.” My research in Irkutsk at times was similar to this experience. It would have been helpful to have a Russian translator to assist who also had an interest in history. In Irkutsk, I wanted to find the seminary that Veniaminov attended the churches in which he had officiated and buildings associated with the Russian American Company.

I had no information on any of these building locations. Armed with a photo of Bishop Innocent, the 1997 program of the Fairbanks conference on Bishop Innocent, and a Russian phase book, I plunged in. I first searched for the office in which Oleg Bychov worked as a scholar and expert on the Russian American company, hoping that someone had taken over his research. I picked out the main Ethnographic Museum as a starting point. Once there, I found someone in the museum gift shop who spoke some English. He set about trying to track down a more knowledgeable person. There was no one in the building and I was redirected to 13 Karl Marx, the museum administrative office. He wrote out on a piece of paper in Russian that I was looking for information on Veniaminov and that I was willing to pay for this. I spent several hours studying the architecture of Karl Marx Street looking for the number 13 and interviewing people on the street about where this illusive building might be found. Finally I returned to the Museum for more specific directions and found that the building was under renovation and number 13 was hidden under a tarp.

In Building 13 at last, I ascended a dark hallway to the third floor and found two women typing in a small office. I showed them my Russian note explaining what I was seeking. One of the women found a student in the building who had a smattering of English. After lengthy discussion, I was told to follow the student. We traversed downtown Irkutsk to the Church of Our Savior (1706). The church is now a state museum specializing in church artifacts. Again my presence generated some confusion, but I was introduced to the director who wanted to know what I wanted. I gave her a copy of the book on historical perspectives of Sitka National Historical Park and she slowly understood my mission. In the end, she accompanied me on a tour.

Upstairs was an exhibit on Russian America, with several pieces that had gone to the United States for an exhibit in Alaska. There was a lovely oil painting of Veniaminov and an interesting engraving of Sitka that I had never seen in any publication. There was also an entire cabinet with books written by Veniaminov plus church robes and other interesting documents. Regrettably, my translator was not able to give a complete explanation of what was being displayed. I returned twice to this museum attempting to figure out the displays.

The Cathedral of the Epiphany (1725) is situated across from the Church of Our Savior. The Cathedral had also been used as a state museum. Recently the Cathedral was reconsecrated. The exterior and interior are undergoing complete restoration, with new icons painted on all the vaults. I returned to the Cathedral many times sensing it was an important link in Veniaminov's life. It turned out that Veniaminov did use this Cathedral and attended services here from 1841 to 1867. It was in the Cathedral that on March 29, 1859, Veniaminov consecrated Archimandrite Petr, formerly dean of the Novoarkhangel'sk seminary, as Bishop and appointed him as Vicar to Alaska.

Another important personage associated with Sitka and Veniaminov was also linked to the Cathedral of the Epiphany. Yakov Netsvetov was the first Alaskan Native to become a priest in the Russian Orthodox Church. Netsvetov served in the central and western Aleutian Islands and was one of Veniaminov's most devoted clergymen. He was sent to study at the Irkutsk Seminary. In October of 1825 Netsvetov was consecrated a subdeacon in Irkutsk and assigned to serve at the Cathedral of the Epiphany. He later served the church in Alaska and in the interior of Alaska. His journals have been recently translated. Netsvetov retired to Sitka, where he is buried on the hill above the Pioneers home. He has been canonized by the Church and is now St. Yacov.

On one of my visits to this the Cathedral I asked the nun who was behind the counter selling icons and candles about Innokenti. This was done using a phrase book and pointing at pictures. In this manner, I learned that I had to be more specific because there are two Saints from Irkutsk named Innokenti. St. Innocent from Sitka is referred to as Innokenti Muscovy, whereas the first Saint from Irkutsk is Innokenti Irkutsky. Innokenti Irkutsky started the Irkutsk Seminary that Veniaminov attended from 1806 to 1823. When Ioann Veniaminov was consecrated as bishop he took the name of Innocent after the first Saint of Irkutsk. An icon of Innokenti Irkutsky can be found on the far left-hand side of the iconostasis in the Chapel of the Annunciation in the Russian Bishops House.

I searched every bookstore in Irkutsk, trying to find more information about places associated with Veniaminov. There were no authoritative guides but I did locate a book by Sergei Medvedev, *Irkutsk Picture Postcards 1899-1917*. The text is in Russian but a description for each postcard is in English. After walking through the old parts of Irkutsk for days, I could take this book and match up most locations with illustrations from the historic postcards (see attached examples). It helped me piece together where some of the buildings I was looking for were located. One building pictured in several postcards which I was not able to locate was the Church of the Annunciation, where Veniaminov

served prior to his departure for the Aleutian Islands. It appears the church may have been damaged in an earthquake or purposely destroyed.

The last building I wanted to visit was the Irkutsk Seminary (founded in 1728). When I was at the Irkutsk State Library, the librarian made a passing comment that the seminary was still standing, not far from the Cathedral of the Epiphany. I returned to this location and found the building that must have been the original seminary (see photos). The abandoned building is derelict condition, with garbage piled against the exterior. Building. At one end, a recent building dating from the twentieth century has been attached. This seminary is one of the most historic buildings in Irkutsk and it is a tragedy to see the building in such derelict condition.

#### *2.1.2.2. Visit to Anga*

Kachuga Landing lies 267 kilometers north of Irkutsk at the headwaters of the Lena River. The Lena is one of Siberia's chief waterways. It was from this point that Veniaminov departed in May 1823 with his wife, son, brother and widowed mother for his post in Unalaska in the Aleutian Islands. His childhood village of Anga is another 26 kilometers to the north. This route was also the main commercial route to the Russian American colonies. The 1,200 miles down the Lena to Yakutsk was the easiest part of Veniaminov's journey which he described as "just pure enjoyment of nature." The Yakutsk to Okhotsk journey became difficult, as described by a friend of Veniaminov's:

It can be said that for our sins we suffered on the Okhotsk Road ten tortures similar to those in Egypt: rabid horses; quagmires where land turned to water for us; nocturnal darkness; branches threatening us with blindness; hunger; cold; mosquitoes; gadflies – truly biting flies; dangerous river crossings and sores {anthrax} on the horses – the tenth punishment.

They departed From Okhotsk on August 30, 1823, arriving in Sitka two months later October 20, 1823.

I spent a number of days trying to find a driver who would take me to Veniaminov's boyhood home. Consensus was this trip could not be done. An agency finally found a driver willing to make the trip, although the driver spoke no English. Traveling down the potholed Russian roads at speeds of 140 km/h, I covered the distance far faster than Veniaminov did when he traveled back and forth to Irkutsk in a cart. The Buriat Republic countryside was wide open. Low hills were covered with birches. At first the open valleys were farmed but as we traveled north there was more grazing. Most homes in the villages that we drove through were small log cabins surrounded by wood fences. Horse drawn carts plied the muddy streets.

We crossed a low divide and into the drainage of the Lena and in the distance Kuchga Landing. We came to an abrupt stop when the road ended at a ferry landing and we could see the main town across the river. There were log cabins along the river, the water was clear and fast running. To the right were low covered birch hills and to the left the river

quickly left the town to wind around between low hills on its way to Yakutsk and the Arctic Ocean. It is always exciting to arrive at the headwater of a great river.

We asked directions and found that we had missed a bridge over the river. Once through the town of Kuchga Landing, the road turned to dirt. It was another 26 kilometers to Anga after which there are no more villages. In Anga we found a local official who took us to the Popov House, where Veniaminov was born. A small log cabin on the edge of the village. The landscape seemed to be unchanged since Veniaminov was born here in 1797.

There are no developments near the house. A short grassy slope descends to a small creek. Across the creek are two small cabins with equally small yards for horses. Beyond this are rolling grass hills stretching to the horizon. The house is typical of other log homes seen throughout the village of Anga and Siberia. There is a small arctic entry before entering the one room cabin which is about 20 feet by 20 feet. A quarter of the cabin space is taken up by a masonry stove. With regret I left Anga and put my life back in the hands of my Russian driver.

#### *2.1.2.3. Visit to State Library of Irkutsk*

Alex arranged a special visit for us to the Library of Irkutsk State University, located in the White House. The White House was built in the Russian Empire style in 1804 for Xenophonte Sibriakov one of the wealthiest merchants in Siberia. The house was taken over as the regional residence for the Governor

We were ushered into the director's office greeted where she greeted us and explained that it was from this office that the governor for the Irkutsk region managed the Russian American colonies. The head librarian had selected prize books from the collection which were shown to us one by one, each literally a Russian national treasure. One book was a copy of Psalms handwritten by a Cossack in 1525. Another was a book of maps showing the Irkutsk region extending all the way to Russian American colonies. The map was hand colored. Next was a massive tome written in Polish in the early 1700s and on the back flyleaf someone had hand written a play. It turned out that the book belonged to Innokenti Irkutsky or the first St. Innocent. The play written in the book was performed at the seminary. The librarian went on to mention that when Innokenti Veniaminov returned to Irkutsk from his travels he always presented the library with copies of books he had just published. On the table, were copies of Veniaminovs Aleut dictionary and a grammar book he had written in Aleut. They were signed by Veniaminov with an inscription to the library. Again, these were handed around the table. The librarian then pointed out another book from which the binding was missing. The pile of folio pages came from the seminary and was one of Veniaminovs favorite books, which he studied constantly.

*Continuing Magic; or, The Wizardry of Nature Used for Profit and Amusement* by Johann Samuel Holt was written in 1800. Reference to this book is made in *St. Veniaminov: Apostle to America* by Paul Garrett on page 23. All his life Veniaminov had a fascination with making clocks, furniture and barrel organs. This book possibly was the basis for that life long interest.

After the librarian had finished with the books, she took us into a large ballroom next to the office. She mentioned that she had also been told that we were interested in seeing maps and so she had arranged a display for us. Spread out before us on a large table were a half dozen priceless maps. A handdrawn map from 1711 showed the layout of the fort site that was the original community of Irkutsk on the Angara River. The other maps dated from the late 1700 to early 1800's. We were told that what we were seeing was extremely rare and generally these maps and books never come out of the archives. On leaving, I personally thanked the Director of the Library on behalf of the National Park Service for the honor she had bestowed on us for sharing these priceless treasures. I presented her with copies of our park literature. In return, we were given a coloring book prepared by the Library for the Bicentennial of Bishop Innocent's Birth in 1997.

The library was not in good condition. It was obvious that there were not funds for proper archiving or preservation of the items in their collection. The lack of funds hindered historical preservation everywhere we went in Irkutsk.

#### *2.1.2.4.Irkutsk and Wooden Architecture*

As I drove into Irkutsk from the airport, I was stunned at the single and multi story log buildings dating back to the 1800's which are evident throughout the city. These buildings are still used with the tenants getting their water from a pump on the corner. To see wooden architecture in a town that is 340 years old with a population of 800,000 people is remarkable. In the heart of Moscow, on the other hand, historic buildings were torn down and replaced with featureless concrete apartment complexes.

Walking down any street in Irkutsk, one can be next to a multi-story modern building and adjacent find a two story log building with ornately decorated lattice work, arctic entry and small kitchen garden in the back. The joinery and ornamentation around the shutters differs with each building. Great pride is taken in painting the shutters. Bright geraniums also lighten up each window as do the ornate white lace curtains. Many of the buildings are in bad repair and tilting at odd angles. Alex remarked that all the old wood structures would be torn down in 25 years and replaced with apartment flats. Seeing the wood buildings made me realize why the Russian exchange students were not impressed when I took them on tour of the Russian Bishops House in Sitka. In Irkutsk there are hundreds of similar buildings, just as old and still occupied.

In addition to the wooden architecture, there are many buildings from the turn of the century still remaining and outstanding in their own right. Irkutsk was the trading center for all the furs coming from Alaska. The merchants wealth is reflected in the buildings along Karl Marx Avenue. Many of these have been turned into shops. I walked into several of these and it's amazing how intact the buildings remain. Most commerce consists of small stalls selling a few consumer goods. Therefore they are not really changing the interior of the buildings. When you walk in the door, the huge reception areas are now a convenient place to set up a multitude of small stands and allow more people to circulate. The sweeping marble staircases to the second floor are still in place, as are the ornate chandeliers.

We met the Mayor of Irkutsk and asked about plans to preserve the unique historic architecture. The mayor replied that the wooden homes are owned by Moscow and that all rent goes there. Therefore the City of Irkutsk has no way to maintain the buildings.

## 2.2. Volkonsky House Visit

On Saturday, May 29<sup>th</sup> at 9:00 PM, Alex had arranged for the director, Mr. Yachmenyov of the Prince S.G. Volkonsky Premises in Irkutsk to give us a tour of the residence. The director is considered one of foremost scholars on the Decemberist movement in Russia. Prince Volkonsky was one of the Decemberists exiled to Siberia by Czar Nicholas I for 20 years in 1825. In the uprising, five major Decemberists were hanged and 120 were sent to Siberia. Volkonsky was considered a brilliant officer and fought in major battles in the Napoleonic Wars. He was elevated to the rank of major general at 24. His wife, Princess M.N Volkonsky followed him into exile in Siberia, leaving her young children and all her possessions in Moscow. The Volkonsky House was built in the village of Ulrick in 1838 and then dismantled and moved to Irkutsk in 1848. In the 1920s the house was converted to accommodate 20 apartments. Restoration of the mansion was started in 1974.

The highlight of the tour was stepping into the main reception room, which has bright red wall coverings and deep pink upholstered chairs. This salon was the center of literary, musical and theatrical parties at that time in Irkutsk. Princess Volkonsky was an accomplished pianist. Her "Lichtenal" grand piano built in 1831, was in the salon. It was brought from Moscow by horse.

The restoration of the piano was done in St. Petersburg and required over 7 years. There are no metal pieces in the piano. So that we could also experience what it would have been like in this salon in the 1840s, the director lit candles on the mantelpiece, turned off the lights, opened up the piano and played several pieces popular in the 1840s. The last piece, a mesmerizing work by Chopin, made everyone in the room rise spontaneously to applaud this stunning performance.

The director spoke no English, just French and Russian, but I had someone translate my appreciation for the fine musical performance as well as the beautiful restoration. I mentioned that the National Park Service might benefit from an exchange. Mr. Yachmenyov was interested in this possibility. A great deal could be accomplished by forming a link between Sitka National Historical Park and the State Museums in Irkutsk which are dedicated to restoring the Decemberist homes.